**If/Then: Humility in Prayer**

**8-1-21**

In the year 375 AD, a monk by the name of Evagrius Ponticus first put to paper what 200 years later would be called “the seven deadly sins” by Pope Gregory and nearly 2,000 years later are still the bane of all humanity.

* Lust, Greed, Envy, Wrath, Gluttony, Sloth, and Pride.
  + But the greatest of these is Pride.
* In fact, the highly respected author and theologian, John Stott, once wrote:

*“Pride is more than the first of the seven deadly sins, it is itself the essence of all sin.”*

* + After all, was it not to Eve’s pride that the serpent appealed when he tempted her?
    - In Genesis 3:5, Satan says to her:

*5 “For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God...”*

* + - This account tells us that she not only thought the fruit looked delicious, but she also believed that it *“was to be desired to make one wise”,* like God.
    - She was not wanting to learn from God, but to become AS God.
      * This is what caused her eat of the fruit and give it to Adam as well.
      * In this case, Proverbs 16:18 was literally true:

*18 Pride goes before destruction,*

*and a haughty spirit before a fall.*

* + - * Or in this case, THE fall.
* C. S. Lewis also argued that Pride was the deadliest of the deadly sins.
  + In his book, *Mere Christianity,* he wrote:

*"Unchastity, anger, greed, drunkenness, and all that, are mere fleabites in comparison [to pride]: it was through Pride that the devil became the devil. Pride,* he said, *leads to every other vice: it is* ***the complete anti-God state of mind****.”*

* + Pride is the complete anti-God state of mind.
* Is it any wonder then, that God tells us that pride is antithetical to prayer!

Last week, we began talking about one of the greatest If/Then statements you will ever find in the Scriptures found in 2 Chronicle 7:14.

*14 If my people who are called by my name humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.*

* Last week we discovered that this “conditional statement” is not based on the premise that we have to say the right words in order to be heard by God, but that we have to enter into prayer with the right heart in order for it to even be prayer.
  + In fact, as we examined the passage more carefully, we saw that prayer, by definition, is an act of humility – an assault on pride itself – because it calls on us to seek God’s direction and desire above our own.
    - Anything less than that – anything driven by pride or self-centeredness – is not prayer at all and thus cannot be heard by God.
    - We found that not everything we call prayer is really prayer at all.
* In Luke 18, Jesus gives His disciples an example of this very thing while teaching them about prayer and how they should pray:
  + Beginning in vs. 9 we read:

*9 He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: 10 “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ 13 But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ 14 I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”*

* Pride is an insidious thing because it takes so many forms.
  + Here we have a man who goes to prayer regularly – not just at the regular times of prayer as designated by the law, but extra times as well.
    - If he is speaking truthfully, then he is, in fact, keeping the law meticulously.
      * He fasts more often than the law requires.
      * He gives generously and regularly.
    - He is the model of faithful practice and he knows it and it fills him with pride – that most slippery and subtle of sins.
      * This is a phenomenon that Benjamin Franklin wrote of with dismay in his autobiography:

*"In reality*, he wrote, *there is, perhaps no one of our natural passions so hard to subdue as pride. Disguise it, struggle with it, stifle it, mortify it as much as one pleases, it is still alive and will every now and then peep out and show itself; you will see it, perhaps, often in this history. For even if I could conceive that I had completely overcome it, I should probably be proud of my humility.”*

* + Such is the case for this Pharisee in Jesus’ story.
    - In all his faithfulness, he just can’t help but compare himself to others who are praying at the Temple.
      * He looks at all the religious things he is doing, and then looks around and makes assumptions – perhaps even accurate assumptions – about how the other people around him are living.
      * But rather than fill him with compassion or sorrow or true gratitude for the grace of God in his life, Jesus says it fills him with contempt.
        + Contempt – the attitude that arises toward others when our pride turns outward to look at others.
      * Oh, he couches it in the religious language of gratitude:

*‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men…*

* + - * + But it is self-aggrandizement that creates a sense of superiority.

Other ways of saying it might be, “I’m thankful that I’m not as stupid as them”, “as sinful as them”, “as deceived as them”, “as selfish as them”.

* + - * + Contemptuous pride is the root of what we call a “holier than thou” attitude, and it convinces us that we are somehow superior to those who are different from us.

And that in many ways, God is really pretty fortunate to have us around to “speak the truth” for him.

* + Now Jesus paints this picture of the Pharisee with an almost caricature-like quality.
    - He is “over-the-top” so everyone could see the hypocrisy and ugliness of his sin.
      * Even the Pharisees who were listening to it.
    - But the larger point Jesus was making here was not just that pride is an ugly sin, but that it, to use a popular word today, “cancels” prayer.
      * Or to put it in the words of our Old Testament passage: where unconfessed pride is present, God does not hear from heaven.
      * This Pharisee’s prayer fell on deaf ears, for in God’s eyes, it was not prayer at all.
    - Rather, Jesus says that the prayer God hears is the humble prayer of the tax collector:

*‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’*

* + - * Or as King David wrote in Psalm 51:16-17

*16 For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it;*

*you will not be pleased with a burnt offering.*

*17 The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;*

*a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.*

* + - * David was not indicating that God did not desire that his people be faithful in observing the rituals He had established in the law of Moses.
      * But rather that the sin of pride can obliterate the value of religious observance especially if that religious observance serves as a cover for contempt toward others.
  + The lesson of Jesus here, as with King David in the Psalms, is that God responds to a humble heart, but the reward of a proud and contemptuous heart is his/her own feelings of superiority.
    - Or as Jesus said it in his sermon on the mount: *Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.* (Matthew 6:5)

But what does all of this have to do with us?

* Well, first I am assuming that we all truly desire to have God *hear from heaven* when we pray.
  + But true prayer, by definition, is a humble activity that begins with an introspection that recognizes our own failings and our continual need for God’s mercy and grace.
  + We all know this theologically, but here’s the thing:
* We are all like fish swimming in a sea full of contemptuous pride.
  + It is everywhere around us.
    - Snarky, clever, affirmed, and encouraged.
    - An attitude of contempt that is so prevalent in our culture today that you can cut it with a knife.
  + And it is playing out in our politics, our educational systems, our media, our churches and even our families.
    - Our leaders, political and otherwise, have decided that open contempt for those who think differently is the way to change the minds of others, leading to gridlock and powerplays.
    - Groups of people feel a moral or intellectual superiority over others and have become dismissive not only of one another’s opinions, but to each other’s hearts as well.
    - And the seeds of this contempt have found a fertile and well-tilled seedbed on social media, springing up like goatheads and thistles, causing pain and choking out every good fruit.
      * Where somehow, because of seeming anonymity, people who are otherwise kind and caring suddenly become vitriolic and caustic saying the crudest and meanest things.
      * And not just to their enemies, but to those who until they voiced a different opinion on something used to be their friends and family.
* And to my dismay, and hopefully the dismay of all of us, this virus has infected the church as well and is doing more damage to her than anything else I have ever seen in my lifetime.
  + And don’t be fooled. COVID is not the problem here; neither are masks or vaccination decisions or politics or protests.
    - Rather, the problem is our pride and the ugly contempt it has fostered in us toward one another that has ravaged the church and is destroying our witness.
  + And I wish I could say that it is all “out there” in other places and with other churches, but its not.
    - In the last year I have read incredibly painful things posted on the internet written by Christ-followers I know.
    - Instead of caring for one another or speaking words of grace and peace and comfort to each other in a difficult time, I have seen us throw each other under the bus because of differences of opinion about temporal matters.
  + And lest you think this is all one sided, it is not.
    - I have seen it on both sides – masks/no masks; vaccines/no vaccines; social justice/criminal justice; black lives matter/all lives matter…
    - It just goes on and on.
      * Disagree with me and you’re a (fill in the blank).
        + Bigot, Socialist, Rube, Sheep, Racist, Woke, Fascist, Apostate…
        + Label after label, insult upon insult…
      * Leading one woman of our congregation to say, “It makes me so sad. COVID gave us a real opportunity to show love to one another, and we failed…”
* So what are you feeling right now, at this moment?

*“Oh God, I thank you that I am not like those other men…”* or

*“He’s only saying that because he’s one of those…(fill in the blank)”* or

*“Oh God, have mercy on me, a sinner!”*

*“Oh God, have mercy on us, sinners all!*

In a moment, we are going to step into one of those spiritual practices of the Christian faith that is shared by every Christ-following Church – communion.

* We do this faithfully once a month, and each time we read the Scriptures and eat the bread and drink the cup.
  + It is one of the most significant and meaningful symbols that we have in Christ’s Church.
    - But just as with the Pharisee’s fasting and tithing, or David’s sacrifices, it counts for nothing unless we humble ourselves and pray.
      * And seek His face, and turn from our wicked ways.
      * Because, in the end, God doesn’t want our rituals or symbols, even though He established them, if He doesn’t have our hearts.
* When speaking of Communion to the Corinthians, the Apostle Paul wrote these serious words:

*27 Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. 28 Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. 29 For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself.*

* + You know what the problem was that Paul was addressing here with the Corinthians?
    - Their contempt for one another.
    - In verses 17-22, Paul describes a divided and fractured church that won’t even wait for one another in order to celebrate communion together.
    - And like Jesus and David, he calls upon the church to first humble themselves before God and confess their sin before coming to the table.

So, before we come to the table today, I want us to examine ourselves.

* In your own heart, in your own mind, review the attitudes of your heart and the words you have spoken or written – especially as it concerns your brothers and sisters in Christ.
  + Bring these things before God like the tax-collector in today’s story – *Oh God, have mercy on me, a sinner!*
    - The altar is open if you wish to come here to pray.
    - Then, in a few minutes, we will come to the table together.
  + And then, after this time with the Lord, I strongly encourage you to go to your brother or sister and confess your sin to them.
    - To defeat contempt, we must swallow our pride.

*When I survey the wondrous cross*

*On which the Prince of glory died,*

*My richest gain I count but loss,*

*And pour contempt on all my pride.*

* + - And we will be cleansed and renewed for the ministry to which God is calling us as His people.

**Benediction**

*Now go with this assurance, that if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*